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ABSTRACT

Community colleges have always embraced general education in principle, but have largely failed to deliver a meaningful program of general studies. Definitions of general education stress the importance of teaching the common knowledge, cultural and environmental understanding, skills, values, and attitudes needed by each individual to be an effective family and community member, worker, citizen, and consumer. If these goals continue to be ignored, the majority of the people of this country will find themselves technologically and civically illiterate, while a small cadre of specialists will control knowledge and thus the decision-making processes. Why then, given the importance of general education and the risks inherent in ignoring it, have most community colleges fared so poorly in providing it? First, most technical curricula require so many credit hours that there is little time to devote to general education. Second, most community colleges have accepted a distribution model of general education that fails to build bridges between the disciplines. Third, most administrators are reluctant to devote the necessary time to restructuring the curriculum. Fourth, the colleges' heavy reliance upon part-time faculty has hurt attempts to bring coherence to the curriculum. And finally, too often general education is confused with the liberal arts, and especially the humanities. Steps that can be taken to develop a meaningful program of general education include the following: (1) campus leaders must believe that general education is critical to the well-being of the campus, community, nation, and world; (2) every campus should devise its own definition of general education and develop and publish a plan for putting that definition into operation; (3) leaders should involve all segments of the college, including the governing board, in curriculum development; (4) colleges should obtain external funding; and (5) colleges ought to work with four-year institutions to ensure that the general education program articulates with their undergraduate requirements. (ALB)

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THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE'S UNFULFILLED AGENDA

George B. Vaughan

April 17, 1989

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Prepared for a conference on "General Studies: Continuing Issues an Emerging Prospects" (Nelsonville, OH, April 17, 1989)

GENERAL EDUCATION: THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE'S UNFULFILLED AGENDA

by
George B. Vaughan

Prepared for a conference on
"GENERAL STUDIES: CONTINUING ISSUES AND EMERGING PROSPECTS"
Hocking Technical College
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General education in the community college has had a mixed history. For example, early in its history, some individuals felt that the community college should offer one type of general education for transfer students and another type for those enrolled in technical programs. This reasoning was based on what courses would fit into the curriculum as well as course content, considerations we must continue to deal with today. One result was courses such as business mathematics and technical writing, useful course perhaps but hardly core courses for a program in general education. Others have felt over the years that the community college, with its emphasis on placing students in the job market, simply did not have the time to bother with general education. Even in their transfer programs, community colleges have tended to follow a rigid line drawn by the four-year institution rather than insist upon the inclusion of general education as a part of the transfer agreement.

In spite of some criticism to the contrary, never did those of us who took the comprehensive community college

seriously ever suggest that one type of student or program was superior to another; never did we believe that we should worry about the general education of transfer students and ignore students in technical programs; never did we reject general education as an important part of programs designed to serve business and industry; and never did we willingly let four-year institutions dictate to us. Nevertheless, as one community college president observes, ". . . the community college has embraced general education in principle and rhetoric but has delivered it poorly" (Case, 1983, p. 100). To offer a meaningful program of general education to all community college students remains the community college unfulfilled agenda, for as Professor Ploghoft correctly noted in his letter of invitation to this conference, there seems to be a vacuum within two-year colleges with respect to the stewardship of general studies.

General Education Defined

General education has not wanted for lack of a definition. B. Lamar Johnson, that grand patriarch of the community college movement and the philosopher of its general education component, defines general education as "that part of education which encompasses the common knowledge, skills and attitudes needed by each individual to be effective as a person, a member of a family, a worker and a citizen. General education is complementary to, but

different in emphasis and approach from special training for a job, for a profession, or for scholarship in a particular field of knowledge" (quoted in Case, 1983, p. 102).

Another definition comes from a task force report issued this past year by the Association of American Colleges entitled A New Vitality in General Education. The report's definition: "We define general education as the cultivation of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that all of use and live by during most of our lives--whether as parents, citizens, lovers, travelers, participants in the arts, leaders, volunteers, or good samaritans" (Task Group on General Education, Joseph Katz, chair, 1988, p. 3). (Interestingly, one of the profound statements made by this publication is so subtle that even the authors overlooked it: the cover of the publication is entitled "Memory Swirls" and is computer-generated art, thus placing past concepts of general education on a head-to-head collision with the ever-present computer and its role in general education, including the arts.)

Back to the definition. I like this definition because it says in a few words what general education is without making it sound as if it is all things to all people, in all places, and for all times. Let me repeat the heart of the definition. General education is the cultivation of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that all of use and live by during most of our lives.

But to incorporate general education into our curricula, we need to do more than define it, not only in community colleges but in almost all institutions of higher education. Ernest Boyer, in doing the research for his book, College: The Undergraduate Experience in America, found that only one subject on his list of general education courses received strong support from students: computer science. History got the least backing. One freshman told Boyer: "This year I have all these 'general education' courses to complete. I wish I could concentrate on what I really need to get a job" (Boyer, 1987, p. 84). But Boyer goes on to add: "We found a longing among undergraduates for a more coherent view of knowledge and, in quiet moments, they wondered aloud whether getting a job and getting ahead would be sufficiently fulfilling" (p. 85).

Why Concern Ourselves With General Education?

Does general education mean that we simply share a common body of knowledge or that as a nation we have a collective memory of what is important to know? Does it mean that once we know names, dates, phrases, and events that we now have what E.D. Hirsch, Jr. refers to as "cultural literacy?" Or do we aim for a certain level of "intellectual elitism" as advocated by Allan Bloom in his best seller, Closing of the American Mind? I do not think that either Hirsch's or Bloom's understanding of the

educated person encompasses either the spirit or the intellectual concepts required of general education in accomplishing the community college mission.

I believe that general education in the community college should be closely related to the concept expressed in General Education in a Free Society, the report of the Harvard committee published in 1946. In what became known far and wide as Harvard's "Redbook," the committee wrote that, "Our conclusion . . . is that the aim of education should be to prepare an individual to become an expert both in some particular vocation or art and in the general art of the free man and the citizen. Thus the two kinds of education once given separately to different social classes must be given together to all alike" (p. 54).

Certainly we in the community college can and do endorse the idea of preparing an individual for a vocation and to be a productive citizen. Certainly we in the community college believe that all social classes have an equal right for an equal education.

The Harvard committee makes an observation that is even more relevant today than it was in 1946 and which clearly speaks to the role of the community college today. To quote again from the "Redbook." "Since no one can become an expert in all fields, everyone is compelled to trust the judgment of other people pretty thoroughly in most areas of activity. I

must trust the advice of my doctor, my plumber, my lawyer, my radio repairman, and so on. Therefore, I am in peculiar need of a kind of sagacity by which to distinguish the expert from the quack, and the better from the worse expert. From this point of view, the aim of general education may be defined as that of providing the broad critical sense by which to recognize competence in any field. . . . The educated man should be one who can tell sound from shoddy in a field outside his own. . . . [In politics] the ordinary citizen must be discerning enough so that he will not be deceived by appearances and will elect the candidate who is wise in his field" (p. 54). I would add that the community college must assure that its graduates--its computer programmer, its nurse, its future teacher, its small engine repairman, can be trusted and that all of its graduates will never produce shoddiness, no matter what their field. The same sentiments are expressed in a report issued by the National Council for Occupational Education and the Community College Humanities Association, two affiliate councils of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges. The report issued by the Shared Vision Task Force is entitled "Integrating the Humanities into Associate Degree Occupational Programs." The Task Force sees the humanities as "one way, and perhaps the only way, to develop certain skills and attitudes the students would need if they were to survive and succeed in an increasingly complex workplace" (Shared

Vision Task Force, p. 37). I should note that the report views the humanities as only one component of general education, albeit an important one.

Education at all levels should serve both the larger society and the individual. That is, education at its best enhances the life of the individual and the lives of others. General education should prepare the individual to be a good citizen in the marketplace, in politics, in the home, in the community, in the work place, and today, more than ever before in history, in the world. Community college students need to understand and appreciate such basic concepts as responsibility, freedom, authority, and participatory governance in a free society.

In its "Policy Statement on the Associate Degree," the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges speaks to the need for including general education as a part of the community college curriculum. It recommends that "all associate degree programs should reflect those characteristics that help define what constitutes an educated person. Such characteristics include a level of general education that enables the individual to understand and appreciate his/her culture and environment; the development of a system of personal values based on accepted ethics that lead to civic and social responsibility; and the attainment of skills in analysis, communication, quantification, and synthesis necessary . . . [to be] a productive member of

society" (AACJC, "Policy Brief," July, 1984). The AACJC, then, is going beyond "keeping American working;" it is advocating that we keep American working and thinking.

More recently, the Report of the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges entitled Building Communities: A Vision for a New Century speaks directly to the need for general education. Quoting from the report: "We conclude that strengthening general education is one of the most urgent obligations community colleges confront. Specifically, the aim of a community college must be not only to prepare students for productive careers, but also to take them beyond their narrow interests, broaden their perspectives, and enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose" (Report of the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, 1988, p. 18).

Dangers in Ignoring General Education

To be an advocate for general education is to demonstrate great faith in the ability of our community colleges to make a difference in the lives of our citizens and in the future of our nation. What are the dangers of placing too much emphasis on vocational education, whether one's vocation be auto mechanic, dentist, lawyer, computer programmer, business executive, or teacher? As he did so many times and in so many fields, Thomas Jefferson said it best in his terse endorsement of education and freedom. He

wrote: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free . . . it expects what never was and never will be."

Gerald Holton, a professor of physics at Harvard University, echoing the spirit of Jefferson's words, warns that 98 percent of the population will end up at the mercy of two percent unless we understand scientific advances. To quote: "On one side we have the technologically trained elite, the 3 or 4 million engineers and scientists. On the other side we have the mass who does not have the tools to question these experts. This new group of illiterates will be in the position of slaves" (quoted in Hall, "Technologically elite to rule 'slaves'." Richmond News Leader, May 27, 1982, p. 15). Ernest Boyer and Fred Hechinger sound the same theme: They warn us that "As a nation, we are becoming civically illiterate. Unless we find better ways to educate ourselves as citizens, we run the risk of drifting unwittingly into a new kind of Dark Age--a time when small cadres of specialists will control knowledge and thus control the decision-making process. . . . In this new age of growing confusion, citizens would make critical decisions, not on the basis of what they know, but on the basis of blind faith in one or another set of professed experts" (Boyer and Hechinger, 1981, p. 47).

Stumbling Blocks to General Education

Community college faculty and administrators are just as intelligent as others educators; most also understand fully the need to provide students with education that goes well beyond vocational education. Why, then, have most community colleges fared so poorly in providing programs of general education? I offer some reasons that I believe have kept us from making serious efforts at incorporating general education into our programs. You certainly have more. Incidentally, I am not giving a lack of student interest as a reason, because I view this lack of interest as a result of a number of factors in society and not a reason for community colleges failing to include general education in the curriculum.

First, most curricula in the technical fields require so many credit hours in the field that there has been little time to devote to general education. Faculty members in these fields have been reluctant to give up any credit hours in the major in favor of general education. Ironically, most transfer programs offer little more time for general education for students working to fulfill an articulation agreement for transfer than do technical programs. However, as the Shared Vision Task Force referred to above notes, "If associate degree occupational programs are to keep pace with the changing workplace requirements of the 1990s and the 21st century, both occupational programs and humanities educators must revise basic attitudes as well as curricula. No longer

can the technical component of occupational programs be considered all-important. . . . No longer can the dichotomy between occupational and humanities faculty and staff exist" (Shared Vision Task Force, p. 44).

Second, we have accepted the distribution model as being appropriate for community colleges. That is, we have permitted students to pick from any number of unrelated courses as a way of satisfying their general education requirements. As the AACJC's Futures Commission notes, "The larger perspective we have in mind [for general education] is more than a grab bag of unrelated courses" (p.18). And as Ernest Boyer believes, "general education is not complete until the subject matter of one discipline is made to touch another. Bridges between disciplines must be built, and the core program must be seen ultimately as relating the curriculum consequentially to life" (Boyer, 1987, p. 91).

Third, many administrators and faculty have become too comfortable in what they are doing and do not want to take on the tremendous task of restructuring curricula with general education at its core. Most presidents and deans have not created the tension which would cause changes to take place; too many faculty have staked out their territory and guard it against all comers. A result is that too often course revision is little more than old wine in new bottles and even old wine in old bottles with new packaging. As one source notes, "Too often, when we have been charged to develop

courses that will foster students' intellectual abilities, we have simply repackaged old courses. . . ." (Task Group on General Education, 1988, p. 11).

Fourth, I sincerely believe that most of us associated with the community college have been so busy building our colleges and programs that we have devoted too little time and energy to thinking about what it means for a student to receive a degree from one of our colleges. Indeed, until the assessment of student learning again moved to the forefront and until accrediting agencies began emphasizing general education, many of us saw little reason to slow down and think about the college experience in terms of student learning.

Fifth, since our students are commuters, we have failed to extend the educational process in any formal way beyond the time students spend in class. While most students in higher education today are commuters, the campus of four-year institutions remains the hub of the educational experience in a way that has never been the case with most community colleges.

Sixth, I believe our heavy reliance upon part-time faculty has hurt our attempts to bring coherence to the curriculum. It is very difficult, and in some cases even impossible, to bring most part-time faculty into curricula planning in a way that offers continuity and which shares the

responsibility and rewards of curricula planning with the part-time faculty.

Finally, I believe that too often we confuse general education with the liberal arts, and especially the humanities. Faculty members and administrators in technical programs are especially prone to view general education and the humanities as the same and become defensive when those teachers who can do little else but talk begin moving into their territory. I believe and have argued hard (to the tune of an over $300,000 grant you will hear more about later from James Perkins) with the National Endowment of the Humanities that the humanities are only one important facet of general education. The Shared Vision Task Force makes the same arguments. You should read the report carefully.

Enhancing General Education

What can we do to enhance general education in our community colleges? Coming together to talk about the subject as you are doing here these few days is important. I congratulate Professor Ploghoft and his colleagues for bringing us together.

A first step in developing a meaningful program of general education is for campus leaders who believe that general education is critical to the well being of the campus, the community, the nation, and the world, to step forward and bring about the changes that must be made if

general education is to be an integral part of the community college's curricula. Again paraphrasing Professor Phoghoft, who writes and thinks with clarity and wisdom, presidents, academic vice-presidents, and other college-wide academic officers need to work again through the issues relating to general education. Without leadership from those who can bring about change, general education has almost no chance of succeeding on our campuses.

I suggest that every campus that is serious about general education begin the process of bringing it into the curriculum mainstream by defining what the campus community means by the term general education. The process of defining the term must be the basis for whatever else emerges. Even if you arrive at a definition very similar to the ones I have shared with you or which you have read, or if you come up with your own definition, the debate that causes you to reach consensus on a definition will be invaluable.

Develop and publish a plan for putting the definition into operation. This may mean a series of goals which must be accomplished by a certain time if the definition is to have meaning. Publication is important, for we in higher education are more inclined to follow a published document than we are to follow up on our debates. Involve all segments of the college, including members of the support staff, in planning the general eduction component of the curriculum. Remember, your goal is to develop a program of

education that involves all segments of the community, so why not start with your own college community?

Involve members of the governing board in the debate on general education. This is absolutely necessary if you are a technical college and your board has given almost all of its attention to technical education for a number of years. Obviously, by involving the board early in the debate you increase the chances of getting board approval when it is time to vote on including a general education core.

Submit a grant proposal to a federal or state agency which has as its purpose the enhancing of general education. But remember to involve the above groups in helping the faculty and administration write the proposal. The team effort that can go into writing and submitting a proposal on general education can build morale as well as the general education program.

Reject the notion that a meaningful program of general education can be developed by requiring students to take a potpourri of unrelated courses. To put it positively, think in terms of offering a common core of general education for common groups of students, and I do not think that it has to be the same core on all campuses or even the same core on a single campus. How you organize the curriculum may be just as important as what is included, for the relationship is symbiotic.

Try to think of our "tight" curricula as an advantage. That is, if you only have six hours of electives in a program such as nursing, you are not faced with a distribution system that students view as freedom of choice. Therefore, you can build the electives in a way that they are included in the common core, thereby satisfying the elective requirements of students and the general education core requirement at the same time.

Consider working with a four-year institution in a way that general education extends from the freshman year through the senior year, with the first two years taken at the community college and the transfer of credits completed successfully at the community college takes place with no questions asked. This approach makes the community college an equal partner in the educational process of transfer students and gives coherence to the curriculum throughout the undergraduate years. This attempt is being made between George Mason University and Northern Virginia Community College, with a potential rather sizeable grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education.

Work with members of business and industry to see that general education is valued by employers in fact as well as in thought. Seek out an employer who will put the "money where the mouth is" and will give preference to employing those graduates with a sound general education core.

The community college is, I believe, in an excellent position to blaze some exciting new paths in general education. What if our community colleges took the lead in developing general education courses in what might be called the "Science of Technology," a sort of "liberal arts" course for liberal arts majors? The students might spend part of the course in an electronics laboratory learning not only about the scientific aspects of the field, but about the practical as well; a part of the course might include visiting local industries and discussing the effects of the latest developments in the field on the economy and the environment; students might spend some time in an automobile shop learning about the combustion engine and why automobiles are both a necessity and an environmental hazard; some time in an air conditioning class learning how air conditioners work and what goes wrong when one ceases working would be enlightening to most students; some time spent with nursing students would provide a first-hand understanding of the demands of the profession and what can happen when society fails to provide its citizens with adequate health care, an especially important consideration as our population ages. Students could select a local industry and report its effects on the local economy, the environment, and relate its products to the future development of the region, the state, the nation, and the world. (In the past even thinking in these terms would have been unheard of; however, with the

increase in acid rain and the threat from chlorofluorocarbons we now realize that general education goes far beyond the campus and the local community. Even Johnny Appleseed would be subject to questions today regarding whether his apples were grown using Alar.) Of course, you could develop your own combination of courses; however, the objective will be the same: to provide future consumers of services with some knowledge and appreciation of what is involved in a given line of work and to do so in a way that they can relate the "science of technology" to the broader aspects of society, including the environment and economy. If you develop a general education agreement with a four-year institution, there is no reason why a course of this type should not be accepted for transfer as part of a general education core.

Finally, think more, speak more, write more, and do more research on what it means to a student to receive a degree from a community college, especially as it relates to that common core of knowledge that we all must have if we are to be successful students, teachers, parents, voters, friends, and citizens of our great nation and of the world.

Thank you.

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